

“Radical Vacations”
Deuteronomy 16:1-17
March 30, 2014

INTRODUCTION:

One of the striking differences between the Bible and our modern American society is the emphasis the Bible puts on rest. The Bible takes rest seriously, and the chief word it uses for that rest is the word “Sabbath.” Israel was to observe one day in seven as a sabbath rest. The land was to be given a rest one year out of seven, letting it lie fallow during that year. And then there was a Sabbath year of Sabbath years following the seventh of the seven year cycles, or year 50, when the land throughout the nation was to be given a year of rest. In an agricultural economy, if the land is allowed the rest, then the farmer gets to rest as well.

Israel’s rest extended beyond Sabbath years and the weekly Sabbath. During non-sabbath years, rest would have come in the form of the three feasts that are described in our passage. These were pilgrimage feasts, meaning that those observing the feasts had to travel to the temple, which would later be located in Jerusalem. Two of these feasts were seven days in length, but since most Israelites lived outside Jerusalem, there would also be the need to take additional time for travel. And since travel was required, it would be impossible for these to be busman holidays. Do you know that term? Its origin is the idea that a bus driver taking a vacation would have to take a bus if he wanted to travel, thus doing the same thing on vacation that he does all the time. So a busman’s holiday is what we would call a working vacation, where you just go somewhere else and do the same thing you always do. When a farmer leaves his farm, there is no possibility of taking his work with him. So we can see that rest is taken seriously in the Bible.

Contrast that with the values of our American culture. We value productivity, hard work, efficiency and profit. Some of that is appropriate. But if it rises to the level that we become unable to rest, then we have run afoul of biblical values. Have you ever felt a little embarrassed if someone called and woke you up? Even if someone calls at 2:00 a.m. and asks, “O, did I wake you?” we may feel that we should say, “No, I was up getting some work done.” We can also feel a little proud if the time stamp on one of our outgoing emails reads 4:30 a.m.

Our word for the feasts that are described in this passage is “vacation.” I prefer the word used in Britain, the word “holiday.” Brits don’t go on vacation; they go on holiday. The word “vacation” comes from a Latin root that means empty, while the word “holiday” comes from the two English words “holy” and

“day.” The kind of radical rest, a “radical vacation”, which is spoken of in this passage can only come as we see our rest days as holy days. Let’s look more carefully now at these three main feasts in Israel and what they teach us about rest.

I. Passover – Remembering Freedom

In this first feast, Moses puts together two feasts and speaks of them as one. Passover was immediately followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and Moses treats them as one feast commemorating Israel’s liberation from Egyptian bondage. This was the first feast on their calendar, taking place in the month of Abib, which would be equivalent to our mid-March to mid-April timeframe. I think we all know the story of Passover, when God sent the angel of death throughout Egypt to kill the firstborn of every family. This was the event that finally broke through Pharaoh’s hard heart and caused him to release Israel from their slavery.

The feast of unleavened bread was a week-long event in which leaven, or yeast, was left out of the bread. Today, we call this flatbread. It is called in verse 3 **“the bread of affliction”** because it is to remind them of the misery of their lives in Egypt, lives from which God delivered them. Unleavened bread was to remind them of this because it is generally not as tasty as bread with yeast. Furthermore, it reminded them that they had to leave in haste, without allowing time for their bread to rise.

So at this feast Israel was to remember both its freedom and the bondage from which they were freed. As Moses worded it, they were to keep this feast **“that all the days of your life you may remember the day when you came out of the land of Egypt”** (v. 3). It was important that they never forget what it felt like to be in bondage and what it was like to be released from that bondage by God’s mighty hand.

How does this apply to us? There is a spiritual application and an economic application. We are most familiar with the spiritual application. Jesus is our Passover Lamb by whose death we have been delivered from the bondage of sin. Like the Passover lamb, Jesus died a substitutionary death. At the first Passover, the angel of death went throughout Egypt putting to death the firstborn of every family. The only exception was to be found in the home where a lamb had been slain and the blood smeared on the doorframe. In every home throughout Egypt that night there was a death—either the death of a son or of a lamb. We celebrate Jesus as our Passover Lamb every time we take communion, which we will be doing at the close of today’s service. We are like Israel in Egypt, in danger of the angel of death coming and taking our lives. We are in this danger because we are guilty of sin. But if we believe this threat is

real, and if we believe that God's provision of the blood of the Lamb is true, then by faith we ask him to cover us with the cleansing power of the blood and we are delivered from this judgment.

It is significant that this is the first feast of the year. That means that God sees it as foundational. If you don't know deep in your heart that God loves you and accepts you in Christ, you will never be able to rest. And if you don't know that God loves and accepts you in Christ, you are not living in the freedom God intends you to live in. I was reading this week about a decisive battle fought in 1066 when William, Duke of Normandy, invaded England. He was victorious because of a device he had invented that gave his soldiers a big advantage. It was the stirrup. Prior to the stirrup, soldiers would ride their horses to the battle, dismount and fight. It was thought that the horse was too unstable a platform from which to engage in battle. But the stirrup gave the soldiers stability, a place to stand and fight that allowed them, with the assistance of the mighty horse, to be faster and stronger than their opponents. That's the power of the blood of the Lamb in our lives, giving us a foundation from which to live the rest of our lives in joyful freedom.

There is another application this has to us that is often missed, and it's in the area of economics. Israel's bondage to Egypt was largely economic in nature. While that economic bondage is intended as a picture of the deeper spiritual bondage from which Jesus sets us free, it is also the case that Jesus sets us free from economic bondage. What does that economic bondage look like? It looks similar to the way it looked for Israel under Pharaoh, who was all about productivity and hard work. Pharaoh said to Moses, **"Why do you take the people away from their work? Get back to your burdens"** (Ex. 5:4). **"Let heavier work be laid on the men that they may labor at it and pay no regard to lying words"** (v. 9). And then there's Pharaoh's requirement of multi-tasking. **"You are idle, you are idle; that is why you say, 'Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.' Go now and work. No straw will be given you, but you must still deliver the same number of bricks"** (5:17-19). Economic bondage happens when our identity gets wrapped up in our productivity instead of in Christ. We become first of all economic creatures rather than image bearers created for a relationship with God.

This economic bondage happens to us more quickly than we might realize. Consider, for example, this area of multi-tasking. I don't mean to suggest that there is anything inherently wrong with multi-tasking or the efficient use of our time. But when it assumes too high a value in our lives we start to think of ourselves in terms of efficiency and productivity instead of our identity in Christ. An elder in another church once told me, with some pride in his voice, of his multi-tasking while listening to the sermon each week. He would use that time to plan his upcoming week. That's like multi-tasking during an intimate moment with our spouse. The radical rest being spoken of in this first

feast happens when we stop seeing ourselves in economic terms and see ourselves instead as God sees us, loving image-bearers. Here's an application and a skill to develop from this. Spend some time today practicing present-tense worship. Those who are in economic bondage are too busy thinking about the future to find God and worship him in the present. So ask God to help you stop and notice him. Give thanks, pray without ceasing, and rest.

II. Weeks – Joyful Giving

The Feast of Weeks is more commonly known as Pentecost because it took place fifty days after Passover. This feast, together with the next, was a harvest festival. Israel had two harvest seasons per year, a spring harvest for the winter grain and a fall harvest for all the summer crops like grapes. Pentecost was the harvest festival for the spring and the Feast of Booths for the fall. There are only two commands given about this feast: to bring a freewill offering and to rejoice. Paul brings these two together in his lengthy treatment on giving as worship when he says that God loves a cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:7). The freewill offering was the offering in addition to the tithe, and it was given in proportion to the harvest. If it was an abundant harvest, it was expected that the gift would be abundant, while a small harvest would be expected to lead to a proportionally small gift. But in either case, it was to be given with joy.

Let me point out two additional facts about this feast. First, the joy of the occasion was to be shared across all the social groups. It was to include the immediate family, the servants, the Levite (who had no land), and even the foreigner in their midst and the orphans and the widows. There is nothing that communicates more powerfully that a person doesn't belong than to be excluded from a party. God's people are told here to be concerned not only about their own rest and celebration, but also to extend it to those who might otherwise be excluded. That's what Jesus meant when he said, **“When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just”** (Luke 14:13-14).

It is important to note as well that harvest feasts are not unique to God's people. Both the harvest feasts spoken of here were present in the land before Israel moved here. What Moses commanded to be done is the same thing Christians did centuries ago with Christmas and Easter. Spiritual content was given to existing celebrations. The spiritual content given to this celebration is mentioned in verse 12. **“You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt.”** Sometimes people are bothered when they discover that Christmas and Easter have pagan roots. They shouldn't be, because these two feasts also had pagan roots. As Christians, we celebrate these things but put in proper theological content.

III. Booths – Joyful Feasting

The Feast of Booths was observed in the fall as a celebration of the summer harvest. According to Leviticus, the spiritual content of this celebration was the fact that Israel lived in tents throughout their forty years of life in the wilderness. A booth is another name for a tent. The God who provided for them so faithfully while in the wilderness, where nothing edible can grow, also provides faithfully while they are now in the land. So they celebrated a great feast that again was a time of joy for all social classes.

It is obvious when we read the New Testament that Jesus had read Deuteronomy 16. He was so committed to feasts and parties that he was criticized for it, particularly for the nature of those with whom he celebrated these events. They were not from the respectable citizenry of the land. Jesus tells us why he ate with sinners in the great parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15). Jesus is like the father in the parable, characterized by a radical love for his two sons. We first get a glimpse of this love when we are told that the father saw his prodigal son while he was still a long way off. That tells us that he was looking for his son every day. And every day until this joyful day of his return, his heart was filled with fresh sorrow at the empty road. Has it ever occurred to you that God is so passionate to have you back with him that he opens himself to great sorrow when you stay away? He does the same for his older son, who stays away from the feast because he is angry at the lavish love of the father for his youngest son, the prodigal son who has now returned. The father does something that would have been scandalous in his day, leaving the feast at which he is the host in order to pursue his lost and angry older son. Such is the lavish, passionate love of the father.

CONCLUSION:

You can only enjoy radical rest when you receive the radical love of your heavenly Father. We get the opportunity of applying this today as we celebrate a feast, the Lord's Supper. As we do so, I encourage you to experience afresh the love of God for you. Remember the radical love of God, who has died in order to have you at this feast. We are the halt and lame, the social outcasts who now find ourselves in the inner circle of God's family. What love! We are to rest in it and to be transformed by it. When the apostle was commenting on these feasts, he said, **"For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth"** (1 Cor. 5:7-8). He's telling us to rest and to get rid of sin through repentance.